

Ability Score Improvement (ASI) in DnD 5e explained

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Yay, a level up! Let's see what I get this time! Oh... an 'Ability Score Improvement' what's that? Let's investigate this class feature which shows up multiple times as characters grow in strength, and find out how best to utilise them.

What is Ability Score Improvement (ASI)?

Ability score improvements are level up features for all classes at certain levels.

By the book, an ASI allows you to either:

Increase one ability score by 2, i.e Strength from 14 to 16 or

Increase two different ability scores by 1, i.e Strength from 14 to 15 and Dexterity from 12 to 13.

What levels do you get ASI?

All classes get Ability Score Improvements at levels 4, 8, 12, 16 and 19.

Fighters get additional Ability Score Improvements at levels 6 and 14.

Rogues get one additional Ability Score Improvement at level 10.

When do Ability Score Modifiers change?

Ability score modifiers increase when the score itself increases to an even number. For instance, an ability score of 12 or 13 would both result in a +1 modifier, whereas 14 and 15 would give a +2. This is important to remember when taking an ASI, as you'll want to reach a new boundary or you won't feel any effect from the improvement.

Can you start with 20 in a stat?

It is possible (if a little unlikely), to start with 20 in a stat. If you roll for stats, doing the standard 4D6 and dropping the lowest value, you can get a maximum roll of 18. Combine this with taking a +2 from racial abilities, and you can start off with a maximum of 20 in that stat.

I'd advise checking with your DM before doing this, as it can lead to an imbalance of power between players and also removes any chance of character growth. For me, some of the enjoyment of DnD is watching your character become more powerful as you progress, which can be taken away by starting with a 20, especially if it's your primary stat.

Can you increase ability scores over 20?

By standard methods, you cannot raise an ability score over 20. Even ASIs do not allow you to increase a stat above these limits. This means if your Wizard has 20 intelligence, they'll have to use their ASIs on something else.

It is possible, however, to have ability scores over 20, by the use of magic items such as a Belt of Giant Strength or some class features like Barbarian's Primal Champion.

How does multiclassing affect ASI?

It's important to understand that Ability Score Improvements are not tied to character level, but class level. This means if you've multiclassed to a level 2 Wizard and level 2 Monk, you won't get an ASI for reaching level 4. Instead, you'll have to wait until you reach level 4 in either class to receive an ASI.

It is possible to build your character in such a way to receive ASIs on consecutive levels, for example, if our multiclass build above progresses to level 3 Wizard and level 3 Monk, they could then get two ASIs in a row by progressing to level 4 in both classes over the next two level ups.

Can I take a Feat instead of an Ability Score Improvement?

If your DM allows, you can instead choose to take a Feat, forgoing the chance to increase your abilities for a special and often unique ability. These can range from learning a new skill, tool or even weapon proficiencies to augmenting your fighting styles and more! Check page 165 for the list of feats in the Player's Handbook. You can also find more feats in both Tasha's Cauldron of Everything, and Xanathar's Guide to Everything.

Can you take an Ability Score Improvement and a Feat?

Generally no, you can only take either an ASI or a feat. However, there are some feats which also increase ability scores, often named 'half feats'.

Which feats increase ability scores?

There are quite a few feats which increase ability scores, over 30 in total, covering all the different stats so there will always be one for your character.

Some popular ones include:

Resilient gives +1 to a stat along with proficiency in saving throws with that stat. Often taken by casters on Constitution to increase the saving throws for concentration checks.

Fey Touched, Fey Teleportation and Shadow Touched all give +1 to a stat and access to a spell or two.

Keen Mind increases Intelligence by 1 and also adds niche, but useful abilities like knowing the time and where north is at all times and having an exact memory of the last month.

These half feats can be super useful when you don't really want to fully commit to an ASI. You can get the best of both worlds and slightly improve your stats whilst getting an additional bonus on the side.

What items increase ability scores?

Like feats, there are many items that increase ability scores. These tend to set your ability score to a particular number, but there are some that just give a static bonus.

Some popular ones include:

Headband of intellect sets your intelligence to 19
Gauntlets of ogre power set your strength to 19.

There are also items that can increase your stats while attuned, such as the Belt of Dwarvenkind, which increases your constitution by 2. This follows the standard ASI rules where this cannot increase your stat above 20.

There are some extremely rare items which can increase your stats over 20, such as the Manuals of Bodily Health and Gainful Exercise, which increase Constitution and Strength by 2 respectively. As these items can increase your stats above 20, whereas ASIs cannot, it is generally advised to keep these items until you reach 20 in the corresponding stat.

Manual of Gainful Exercise

Items such as the Manual of Gainful Exercise can take your ability scores over 20

ASIs vs Feats

Increasing a stat by two feels like a quieter improvement than a feat which can add new spells or abilities to your character right away, but it's important not to underestimate the value of increasing your ability scores.

Let's look at a level 4 fighter wielding a greatsword. If he has a 16 in strength, this equates to a 'to hit' roll of +5, with a damage roll of $1d12 + 3$ on a successful hit.

If our fighter uses his ASI to increase his strength to 18, this gives him a 'to hit' roll of +6 and damage of $1d12 + 4$.

Let's pair this against an enemy of 13 AC, and see the expected damage per turn:

16 Strength Fighter vs 13

To hit: + 5

Damage: $1D12 + 3$ – Averages 9.5

Chance to hit: 60% (Has to roll an 8 or higher)

Expected damage = $9.5 * 0.6 = 5.7$

18 Strength Fighter vs 13 AC

To hit: + 6

Damage: 1D12 + 4 – Averages 10.5
Chance to hit: 65% (Has to roll a 7 or higher)
Expected damage = $10.5 \times 0.65 = 6.8$

As we can see, this results in an almost 20% increase in damage per round. These are somewhat exaggerated numbers, with factors like extra damage on hit, magic weapon bonuses and different AC values changing the mathematics slightly, but the message still stands. If you do decide to take a feat over an ASI, make sure it's providing enough value to make up for the missing score improvement.

It's generally advised to use these ASIs to improve the primary stat for your class, as you'll be using that attribute the most and so will gain the most value. That said, if you're already at 20 in your main stat, or your class uses multiple stats, like a Paladin or Monk, you can also increase your secondary stats to buff your character.

Should I take a feat or ASI?

Ultimately, it's up to you! Depending on what your character needs, either an ASI or a feat may be more useful. I'm currently running a level 3 Barbarian and am considering taking either the Tough feat, for +2 extra HP per level, or increasing my constitution by 2 to gain +1 HP per level, but also increase my constitution saves by 1 as well as my AC by 1.

There are no wrong answers as long as you're building the character you want to, and sometimes taking a feat to add flavour, new options or versatility is better than taking the increase to stats.

Well, that's everything about ASIs and feats. Hopefully, you'll now be able to make a more informed decision the next time you level up. Keep an eye on your class's feature table to see when an ASI is coming your way, and get planning your progress!